

Wycombe Wanderers 2, Hitchin Town 1

WYCOMBE WANDERERS survived a hectic last 15 minutes against Hitchin on Tuesday night to register their third consecutive Rothmans Isthmian League victory. The three points keeps them four ahead at the top of the table and gave them deserved revenge for their earlier 1-2 defeat at Topfield in the sixth match of the season (writes Stuart Earp).

On that occasion, a somewhat fortunate goal gave Hitchin the verdict and for a time it seemed they might repeat the feat and pull back to 2-2 at Loakes Park.

In the absence of Paul Birdseye, Derek Gamblin and Ian Rundle, Wycombe were forced to pull back Terry Reardon into the number two shirt with Graham Mackenzie filling the vacant midfield spot. Both Reardon and Mackenzie turned in useful performances but obviously the usual understanding in midfield wasn't there.

Wanderers also suffered a setback soon after half time when their leading marksman Tony Horseman was forced to go off after a clash of heads with Martin Howkins. Tony had four stitches put in a cut above his left eye but said afterwards he hoped to be fit for the Easter matches.

Keith Mead got in Wycombe's first effort at goal when, after only two minutes, he headed Holifield's corner straight at Alan Saward. It was the first of a string of corners in the first 20 minutes that kept Hitchin under pressure but produced few chances.

Just when Hitchin had seemed to have soaked up all this punishment, Wanderers went ahead with a neat goal. Steve Perrin, who looked far more dangerous upfront, sent over a cross which Horseman just failed to reach. The ball found Pritchard who in flash, returned it across the penalty area for Perrin to soar up and nod home. Howkins could only help it on its way.

Hitchin could find no reply to Wycombe's possession football. Outgunned upfront, they mustered only a handful of raids throughout the first half as Wanderers dominated play with a series of near misses in front of goal.

One man who seemed destined to score was Larry Pritchard. Enjoying a new lease of life in his forward role, the Blues skipper was a constant threat to the visitors and his elusive running off the ball posed real problems. Twice he went within an inch or so of a second goal. In the 27th minute he was given all the time in the world to shoot by a retreating Hitchin defence but saw his shot deflected for yet another corner. Two minutes later he lofted a looping header from Reardon's clever cross, just past the far post.

By this stage, of course, the Blues should have been at least a couple of goals up but after doing all the work in the first 40 minutes, they found themselves back on level terms when Tony Brothers pulled one back for Hitchin — with about their first serious attack of the half.

It was a beautifully worked goal but one had the feeling that had Maskell been more active earlier in the game, he might well have prevented the score. Pete Watson flighted a clever free kick over the 'wall' and into Wycombe's penalty area. Howard Kettleborough screwed in a header which Maskell, off his line, could only palm onto a post. The ball bounced out for

Tony Brothers to drive home joyously against his old club.

Just before the break John Kettleborough — brother of Howard almost gave Wycombe the lead again with a suicidal pass back but Saward saved the day by smothering the ball at Horseman's feet. Then, just when it seemed the teams would be all square at the interval, Wycombe notched their second goal.

Mackenzie began the attack with a perfectly weighted ball down the flank for Perrin. Steve took it to the bye-line and crossed invitingly. Pritchard took one mighty swing at the ball and missed completely but Holifield had more time for a second bite at the cherry and carefully drove home past Saward on the right foot.

The second goal at least gave Wanderers some reward for dominating the first half and after just two minutes of the second period it could so easily have been 4-1. Firstly Horseman latched onto a poor goalkick from Saward but shot too weakly to trouble the 'keeper and then Pritchard produced one moment of sheer magic. Making space for a shot, he twisted inside Tony Martin, spotted the 'keeper a fraction off his line and sent in a dipping shot which cannoned off the crossbar.

Horseman went off to be replaced by Evans in the 49th minute, and soon afterwards Hitchin gave Wycombe an anxious moment when Maskell's weak goalkick was headed straight back towards the net by Kettleborough from at least 30 yards. But as Maskell scurried back to cut off the danger, Giggle was trapped offside.

But after dominating the majority of the match, Wycombe then had to endure an anxious last quarter. A Town equaliser in the closing stages would have been a travesty but Wycombe would have had only themselves to blame for not sewing the match up earlier.

About the closest Hitchin came to that equaliser was in the 77th minute. Watson's corner had Maskell in trouble as he came too far and could only push the ball onto the head of Paul Giggle. With two men on the line, the little winger aimed for the roof of the net but saw his effort clip the crossbar and go behind.

Two minutes from time, Kettleborough wasted the best chance of the half. Caught square by Bunker's through ball, Wanderers seemed to have thrown away two points when Kettleborough broke free of the defence. Mead, however, jostled the Hitchin striker just enough to put him off his shot which went inches wide as Maskell advanced.

WYCOMBE: J. Maskell; T. Reardon, K. Mead, D. Bullock, R. Grant; G. Mackenzie, P. Wood, M. Holifield; S. Perrin, A. Horseman (sub D. Evans 49 mins), L. Pritchard.

HITCHIN: A. Saward; A. Martin, J. Kettleborough, M. Howkins, P. King; A. Brothers, A. Jackett, P. Watson (sub S. Mahoney 82 mins), N. Bunker, H. Kettleborough, P. Giggle.

REFEREE: E. J. Martin (Selsdon).

Half time: 2-1. **Goalscorers:** Wycombe — Perrin (22), Holifield (45); Hitchin — Brothers (38).